



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2010 with funding from  
Multicultural Canada; University of Toronto Libraries

# Introduction

Elizabeth Sinn

The historical significance of Hong Kong's return to China hardly needs emphasizing. It marked a crucial turning point in British imperial history with the loss of its last important colony. It marked a similarly significant turning point in Chinese history with the ending of a century and a half of national humiliation at the hands of imperialists and the final demise of the unequal treaties. More broadly, the reversion of a former colony not to independence but to return as an integral part of its "motherland" was an aberration of the "normal" trend in world history and a distinct departure in the "standard" process of decolonization. Equally anomalous was the fact that Hong Kong, renowned as one of the world's freest and most dynamic capitalist economies and a major investor in China despite its small size, should be absorbed as part of socialist China. Above all, Hong Kong was to be governed under the principle of "One Country Two Systems", a novel concept which not only would affect Hong Kong's seven million inhabitants, but which might serve as a paradigm of governance for territories, especially contested territories, far beyond its boundaries.

It is not surprising, then, that Hong Kong's reversion should have attracted such attention around the world. Conferences, books, articles, television documentaries – even plays – on the topic proliferated, and as the event neared, the international press joined in, reporting it with great gusto. Writings and images were churned out, ranging from the most sensational to serious attempts at research and interpretation. Much of the enthusiasm for the SAR, however, has waned in the post-handover years. For us in Hong Kong, the need to make sense of the event in order to adapt to its consequences in the most positive and constructive way possible, makes it imperative for us to sustain the pursuit of a genuine understanding of the nature of our society. If anything, it is exactly now, when the sensational and

journalistic hoopla has subsided, that the time is ripe for more objective, detached and in-depth examination.

The Hong Kong Culture and Society Programme was set up at the University of Hong Kong partly to enrich the self-knowledge and self-understanding of Hong Kong people. As we face a new stage of history, with many unprecedented changes in areas of culture and values, and the social ethos of governance, we hope to generate a 'bank' of Hong Kong scholars and specialists who can contribute to thoughtful and well-informed ways of building a more creative and reflective, humane and just society. Through research into different areas of Hong Kong's experience – historical legacy, social development, economic dynamism, civic order, political governance, cultural identity – we aim to inform policy-makers at all levels in their decision-making processes and expand the capacity for the applied side of academic research.

Besides research and publication, the Programme also organizes workshops, symposia and conferences as occasions for gathering information and provoking thought. In 1999, we organized a series of seminars entitled "Hong Kong, British Crown Colony, Revisited". Six retired expatriate senior servants from the colonial era were invited to speak on their own experience in the colonial service, and it was hoped that their narratives would provide unique insights into Hong Kong's past.

The necessity to scrutinize Hong Kong's history in order to gain insights for future action is of course a common enough view. The crucial point is how one goes about it. Prior to the handover, despite the many academic works and general books about Hong Kong, there were still many gaps to be filled. For one thing, there was an overemphasis on the Sino-British negotiations of the early 1980s and the transition of Hong Kong from a British Crown Colony to a Chinese Special Administrative Region. Several collections of documents were also produced, notably the series "A Documentary History of Hong Kong" edited by David Faure and Steve Tsang. Believing that it would take time for the HKSAR to come to terms with its colonial past, Faure and Tsang initiated the series to enable

the general reader to make a more informed assessment of that past. In addition to merely reprinting documents, Faure and Tsang illuminate the documents with introductory comments and organize them in such a way that the volumes may be read as general history, a truly value-adding exercise.

History can be approached in other ways, from different directions and at many different levels. In studying Hong Kong's colonial history, it is as valid to study the policy-makers in London as it is to study the colonized. One can, of course, focus on the Governors. Jonathan Dimpleby's *The Last Governor* argues in particular that one man, Chris Patten, through his approach, his tactics and feelings, shaped the course of Hong Kong's last five years as a British colony, with wide repercussions for the post-handover years as well.

What the "Hong Kong, British Crown Colony, Revisited" series of seminars hoped to achieve was to turn the limelight on the Administrative Officers, a special class of civil servants, agents of colonialism. The AOs evolved from the Cadet Service, first introduced in March 1861 by Governor Sir Hercules Robinson, who was appalled that senior officials, who were British, could not communicate directly with the vast majority of the population in the colony who were Chinese. Interpreters, who were Chinese and Portuguese, had insufficient education to qualify them for higher duties while the British officials were not keen to learn Chinese. The only solution was to introduce cadets, graduates of English universities with a knowledge of Chinese. It was originally intended that they should first serve as interpreters at courts for three years and, if competent, be considered for other appointments in the administration. In fact, the first cadets were so much in demand that they were all appointed to fairly senior posts without first becoming interpreters as planned. This scheme laid the foundation for an elite service within the Hong Kong Government which gradually provided the pool for the selection of most the senior officials in the colony, including a number of Governors. The first Chinese AO was appointed in 1946. Mrs. Anson Chan, who became the first Chinese and first woman to hold the post of Chief

Secretary in Hong Kong (1993-2001), was among three women to be appointed AO in 1962. The system has continued after the handover, and despite the fact that the handful of AOs of prewar days has grown to a small army of around 500, its elitist character has hardly diminished.<sup>1</sup>

Our six speakers, witnesses to an exciting period of Hong Kong's growth and transformation, showed us interactions between the Government and the people at very special levels of society. The series provided a unique occasion to listen not only to their experiences but also to their perception of themselves as individuals and members of a system. As they were free to choose any aspect of their administrative experience as the topic of their seminar, the very choice of topic further reflected their personal concern, and their views on their own contributions and even failings.

Colonial governance was very much centred on "the man on the spot". The term was most often used to refer to the Governor, who, given a wide berth by London, played an almost independent and decisive role in policy-making. Less often was it used to refer to the District Officers – and all our speakers served as DOs – and other front-line actors, who, as agents implementing policy, played no less vital a role in effecting any given policy. They modified policies in subtle ways – and not so subtle ways as demonstrated by Patrick Hase. They influenced the public's response to government, and on a more abstract level, the public's response to colonialism itself. The DO's activities underlined the dynamic nature of colonialism. These men constantly defined and redefined the maze of policies, principles, instructions handed down from London and Hong Kong's own central government. The idiosyncrasies of individuals, the contingencies of events and other unforeseeable circumstances further added to the unpredictability of outcomes as they translated policy into action on the ground.

Through their narratives we learn how important events and institutions took shape – the evolution of the Heung Yee Kuk, the issuance of the "Letters B" and the genesis of the "Small House" in the New Territories, and in the urban areas, the formation of the City

District Office and the Mutual Aid Committees – and more. What is perhaps even more meaningful is that we learn, by hearing it from the men most intimately involved with these processes, why some things happened the way they did.

Another interesting aspect of the seminars was the recurrent reference to District Officers as *fumuguan* – officials who were viewed by the ordinary folk as caring custodians – a concept perhaps alien to Hong Kong's young Chinese urbanites. Yet the rural population's familiarity with the concept of *fumuguan* and the paternalism inherent in the District Officer/ Resident system in the British Empire highlight the often overlooked similarity between pre-modern Chinese concepts of governance and the British imperial ones of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Chinese local magistrate in imperial times, like the DO, was ideally a generalist, who was expected to solve all problems from general knowledge. But ultimately, his ability to govern and manage a full range of issues from security to land to public works to family disputes rested on his moral judgement and personal integrity. This perhaps explains the almost instinctive affinity between the DOs and the rural population of Hong Kong, an affinity also seen between the colonial officials and the Chinese urban social elite in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although these values, common to "traditional" Chinese official-scholars and British colonial officials, proved to be at odds with the new urban population of today which idealizes reason, efficiency and modernity, encounters between the British District Officer and the Chinese residents of the New Territories even in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century were in many ways a microscopic meeting of minds – an encounter of two empires which mirrored each other in their paternalistic approach to governance.

Hong Kong manifests not one but many faces of colonialism. Time is one crucial factor, and over the one and a half decades since 1841, the administration had undergone genuine transformations, the localization of the civil service being just one of the most visible. It is apparent that the administration of the New Territories and the urban areas was distinctly different. But, bearing in mind these local variations, we should view Hong Kong's colonial experience

against a wider backdrop. One point highlighted in the seminar series was the vastness of the British Empire at the end of the Second World War, and the vastness – as well as the unity – of the colonial service. As Ian MacPherson's paper notes, men were transferred from colony to colony within a large imperial framework operating on the basic assumption that if they could serve and survive in one locality, they could in any other, like interchangeable nuts and bolts in a large machine<sup>2</sup> – much as magistrates in imperial China were transferred from county to county, province to province. What kind of mindset, in particular, what sense of mission, did men who belonged to that era and background, so vividly recalled by John Walden, feel when they left their homes to venture forth to uphold or dismantle the Empire? How did the wisdom, and follies, accumulated from decades of ruling half the world, manifest themselves in the administration of Hong Kong? Given the unity and uniformity of the service, in what ways was the government of Hong Kong unique, if it was unique at all?

Ian MacPherson also notes the obvious irony that Tanganyika, which was hardly developed, was to become independent while Hong Kong, which was so sophisticated, would not. However, underneath the façade it is important to remember that Hong Kong's sophisticated economic and political infrastructure was not to be abandoned. The Joint Declaration and Basic Law do provide for the retention of many pre-handover institutions, notably the rule of law and the capitalist economic system, two features which have enabled a continuation of Hong Kong's entrepreneurial spirit and its stable civic order.

From the six speakers we learn what went wrong as well as what went right. Sir David Akers Jones' account of non-democratization in Hong Kong over the entire colonial period may be read as a passionate plea for reflection on the tensions between the possibilities and limitations of historical change. This is also reflected, albeit in a different way, in James Hayes' paper assessing British colonial governance in the New Territories. For Dr. Hayes, the comparatively successful record of the British was pivoted upon "interminable negotiation" and "mutual restraint". Sir David, on the



other hand, explained the breakdown of Sino-British relations, which not only created bitterness in the immediate pre-handover years but also crippled the constitutional arrangements that were to plague the SAR after 1997, largely due to the obstinacy, ignorance and arrogance of Chris Patten. This may appear at first sight as oversimplification, but it is a useful reminder to those politicians who wish to play God, that long after they are gone, their actions and policies will long remain to trouble and hurt those who have to live with its consequences. Sir David's gentle plea that instead of being too mesmerized by our success and prosperity we should be more mindful of our vulnerability and shortcomings could not be more timely.

Constitutionally, Hong Kong's decolonization defies all conventional patterns of the process. However, it is said that the hardest part of decolonization is the decolonization of the mind. The great danger is that while one abandons old myths and prejudices one simply replaces them with new myths and prejudices. Hopefully here, where the decolonization process is so unconventional, we may be spared such folly. Hopefully, there will be enough courage in Hong Kong for policy-makers and citizens alike to make judicious choices in an open-minded fashion, seeking wisdom from the past even as we embrace the future. Only then, perhaps, can we be truly decolonized.

The seminar series was not designed as an exercise in nostalgia. We had hoped for, and did gain, insights. I thank the speakers for sharing so much with us and for contributing their talks to this collection.\*

I am grateful to the University of Hong Kong's support for the Hong Kong Culture and Society Programme, and to Chan Yin Ha, Chan Ching Yee and Dr. Pun Ngai for organizing the seminar series, and to Yin Ha for helping with the manuscript.

---

\* Unfortunately, John Walden did not contribute his talk to this volume.

## NOTES

1. See H.J. Lethbridge, 'Hong Kong Cadets, 1862-1941', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 10 (1970), pp. 36-56, reprinted in his *Hong Kong: Stability and Change* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 31-51.

A documentary account of the evolution of the Cadet Service is given in Steve Tsang (ed) *A Documentary History of Hong Kong: Government and Politics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995) pp. 148-160.

At the time of publication (summer 2001) there are 580 AO postings but only 500 some are filled.

2. For an overview of the history of the Crown Service, see Anthony Kirk-Greene, *On Crown Service: A History of HM Colonial and Overseas Civil Services, 1837- 1997* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999).

沙田鄉小第七屆職員就職典禮  
 主席 梁卓如 敬啟

沙田鄉小第七屆職員就職典禮



沙田鄉小第七屆職員就職典禮  
 主席 梁卓如 敬啟

Denis Bray, District Officer, Tai Po, at the inauguration of the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Committee of the Shatin Rural Committee, 1954. (Courtesy of Sir Denis Bray)

